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ABSTRACT

A seven-step process helps students writing research papers distinguish between what they already know before they do any research and what they find out, and also avoids cut-and-paste, redeye, and plagiarized research papers. Students first narrate the story of the research process (which will be the structural spine of the paper) and then go through a brainstorming and class response process to choose topics, the seven steps to write the paper, which are as follows: students (1) write a description of everything they know about the topic already; (2) develop questions based on the difference between what they know and what they want to know; (3) make lists of possible ways (resources) to shed light on these questions; (4) investigate these resources until they find out something they didn't know before; (5) write a first draft and share it with teacher and class; (6) write another draft, integrating teacher recommendations; (7) write final drafts, including evaluative conclusions instead of just summaries, as well as footnotes and citations. This process spans the entire semester, happening concurrently with other assignments. (SR)

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Personally Attempted Instructional Innovation: One Page Version

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A WAY TO BREAK DOWN WRITING RESEARCH PAPERS INTO STEPS THAT EMPHASIZE THE DISCOVERY ASPECT OF RESEARCH

Problem: How do you get students to distinguish between what they already know and what they find out? Also: avoiding cut-and-paste, redeye, and plagiarized research papers.

Proposal: Get them to write about what they already know BEFORE they start doing any research; then get them to narrate the story of the research process as a story of discoveries.

Process: First night of class, ask students to brainstorm possible research topics. (Essential that they generate their own topics; teacher risk fairly high, here, but bite the bullet!) Compile the proposed topics and feed them back to class the next week to display variety. Ask again a few weeks later; topics will be more ambitious. Audience for topics is other members of class: students write notes to each other on value of topics, make suggestions. By end of first month (out of 18 weeks), make them commit to a topic (commitment is not final; changing topics if you hit deep trouble is legitimate fallout of risk of research.)

First step of writing: In class, have them write a description of everything they know about the topic already. Lean heavily on the word "description" -- the student has an image, a picture, in his or her mind of what this topic means, looks like, feels like, etc; every detail is important (like associating to a dream). Take at least an hour to get this description on paper. Teacher needs to understand what kind of investment, what past experience, draws each student to his or her topic. **Second step:** students develop questions based on difference between what they already know and what they want to know. Lots of class input here on how to formulate strong questions. **Third step:** make lists of possible ways to shed light on this question; resources. Class suggestions. **Fourth step:** go out and investigate these resources until they find out something they didn't know before. (This is the minimum; most students go far beyond this.) **Fifth step:** write a first draft, show to teacher and class. (Length is irrelevant, here; message from teacher is "Make it as long as necessary.") Students will be using the narrative of their discovery as structural spine of the paper. Costs of xeroxing for entire class may affect class response opportunity at this point. **Sixth step:** teacher will usually recommend some additional resource, a book or experience the student hadn't thought of. Student writes another draft, integrating this new resource. (This is a very hard step -- teacher usually recommends something from left field!) **Seventh step:** final drafts, two or three of them, as students get a grip on writing evaluative conclusions instead of just summaries, as well as footnoting and citing.

Time span: Entire semester (other assignments happen concurrently.) Final paper is usually 20 -30 pages, at least 4 (sometimes 15) items in bibliography.

Message: ignorance (or innocence) is a privileged state. The person who doesn't know something, and acknowledges it, is in a position of power; in a position of greater power than the person who claims certainty. All the great thinkers -- Aristotle, Einstein -- cared more about what they didn't know than what they did know. A question is more powerful than a statement -- even more powerful than a command.

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I teach English 1-A, the transfer reading and composition course, in a PACE (Program for Adult Continuing Education) program at Vista Community College in Berkeley. I normally have 30 students in a class. The classes tend to be 70 per cent black, 10 per cent Hispanic, 10 per cent Asian, 10 percent other -- meaning Polish, Afghani, Swiss, whatever. Eighty per cent are women, and the average age is around 45. In other words, our student population is almost entirely working people, mostly mothers with family responsibilities. Our students take 12 units per semester delivered via once-a-week five-hour class sessions, two TV-and-discussion segments, and one monthly all-day conference, enabling them to get an AA degree in five semesters. The pre-1-A composition course is integrated with a history, economics, and political science module; English 1-A is integrated with a poetry, humanities and speech module. One of the byproducts of this integration is a plethora of faculty meetings where teachers from a variety of disciplines agonize about how to use writing in the classroom. Teachers variously assign themes, essays, term papers, reports, and research papers; students variously respond with sermons, manifestos, stories, feature articles (which are, after all, what they read out there in real life) and concoctions which represent hours of hard labor copying word-for-word out of the encyclopedia or text.

I have made a fuss about trying to get students to write what I call a "real" research paper. For nearly all of my students, this is the first time they've ever written a research paper; for many of them, it's the first time they've written anything more than four or five pages long. I try to make it clear that a research paper differs from a theme, an essay, a term paper, or a report in this way: writing the research paper involves doing research which means finding out something you didn't know previously. This has consequences. A change of perspective, a transformation, a re-casting of experience happens as a result of finding out something. Sometimes, if you think about something differently, you may even have to act differently.

One kind of paper that I get which does not count as a research paper (and therefore can't get better than a B, no matter how tidy, well-constructed, and well-documented) is the paper that reads like a stack of index cards written up into paragraphs. A paper like this is basically a summary of the available information on a particular topic; the student has gone to the library, taken down a whole lot of books, made notes, and typed them up. Another unacceptable paper is the one which expresses a student's opinion, however eloquently, but shows no sign of that opinion having been tested

against empirical data in the recent past. Such papers tend be against Darwin, against homosexuality, against racism, against oppression, against drug use, etc. Some of these are powerfully written and on the side of the angels; therefore, unless the teacher has explicitly required that the student show signs of having learned something since he or she started writing the paper, they're hard to challenge.

Here are some aspects of research which my students need to hear about:

1. Research takes time. That's why the assignment is spread out over the whole semester. You can't do research in one night, even if you drink a pot of coffee. You can't re-think something unless you have time to mull it over. The grass has to grow.

2. Don't lie to yourself about what you're interested in. This lie will catch up with you: you'll get bored.

3. Don't choose a topic because you're already expert in it; Research isn't about showing off what you already know; it's about finding out new stuff.

3. Research exposes you to the possiblity that you might have to change your mind about something. There is no guarantee you will like what you find out. It has consequences, often in action.

4. Don't compromise on your question; if you're really doing research, there will be times when your question will be your only friend, so choose it carefully.

I have used the seven-step semester-long research paper assignment twice now. The first step -- the one in which students write down everything that they already know about their topic before they start doing any research -- is the key step. Those pages, often full of errors or misapprehensions, provide a benchmark against which new understandings can be measured, creating a story about how the student moved from one way of thinking to another way of thinking.

Topics that students have written on range from what to do about a family member who may have Alzheimer's; why are some sexual practices tolerated in some cultures and not in others; what is the true story behind psychic phenomenae; why can't we build a utopia; why don't we hear anything about the women who worked in the Civil Rights movement; is the image of

women in oil paintings different from the image of women in advertising; what will it take to make the environmental movement effective in this country, etc.

The student who wasn't sure if her mother had Alzheimer's investigated enough health care services to get her mother into a program researching Alzheimer's; the student who was curious about cross-cultural sexual practices found out that there weren't any good books just about that, and that she was going to have to study sexual practices in context -- in other words, anthropology -- in order to get any answers; the student who wondered about psychic phenomenae decided, after a lot of interviews and agonizing, that they weren't real, but argued that they were good practice for the imagination anyway; the student who wanted to know why utopias didn't last learned about Tahiti and the history of exploration in the 18th century, but balked at taking on anthropology; the student who asked about the women in the Civil Rights movement traced the connection between the Civil Rights movement and the last 20 years of the feminist movement; the student who was interested in oil paintings and advertising found out a lot about the past and present of the art market; the student who wwondered about the future of the environment had to learn a lot about economics and the conflict between doing good for people and doing good for the earth.

The successful papers -- and a surprisingly high number of students were able to generate long, successful papers -- were those which displayed a real development of thought. They also displayed a degree of familiarity with the language of the subject matter and a consciousness of the extent to which this langauge was particular to that subject matter. Because they stayed close to the writer's own perspective, they contained little, if any, plagiarism. And finally, despite being much longer than anything these students had written before, they hung together, so that the reader was never lost because the overall organization of the papers was the simplest organization there is, a narrative of something that happened over time.

A few final comments:

1. The topics must be generated by the students. A topic laid on from above won't have the same effect.

2. Deadlines for the various drafts must firm; even good students will try to write the whole thing the night before, thereby missing the point.

3. The class, not the teacher, should be the audience. The class is the culture in which the student lives. A topic a teacher might be bored with can be a live topic for a class. Class time must be set aside for getting class reactions to various drafts. Think of Aristotle's four categories of criticism: something may be challenged because it is inconsistent, innaccurrate, incomplete, or morally harmful. The only one the teacher is likely to be better at spotting than the other students is the third.